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valleyadvocate.com

No Way to Run a Railroad

■ The Valley's Pan Am Railways Is An Example Of All That's Wrong With
The Way America Moves People And Freight.

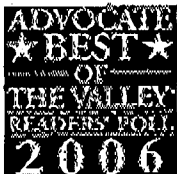
January 25, 2007

By Eesha Williams

LISTINGS

What's
Going On
in the Valley.

Music, Arts,
Dining,
Stage, Etc.



Best Of 2006
Valley:
A Complete
Directory



Best Of 2006
Springfield:
A Complete
Directory

There is just one passenger train a day that runs down the length of the Valley. Assuming the train is on time, which it often isn't, it takes two hours and nine minutes to get from Brattleboro, Vt. to Springfield, Mass. That's an average speed of 27 miles per hour. (The train makes just one stop, in Amherst.) Driving from Brattleboro to Springfield usually takes under an hour.

On the Boston to New York City Amtrak line, trains travel at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour and average about 60, including stops. To understand why Amtrak is so slow in the Valley, one must travel down the river from Brattleboro to Deerfield, Mass., home of Pan Am Railways' sprawling freight train parking lot and repair facility.

Pan Am Railways (until recently known as Guilford Rail System) runs freight trains on about 1,600 miles of track that it owns in New England and New York. Pan Am is privately held, not publicly traded, so executive compensation and other information is unavailable. The company's spokesman, David Fink, did not respond to repeated requests to be interviewed for this article.

Timothy Mellon of Old Lyme, Conn. owns most of Pan Am and controls the company. Mellon bought the railroad in 1981 for \$24 million cash. In 1998, he spent \$30 million to acquire the bankrupt Pan Am airline, which now operates flights between Florida and cities like Elmira, N.Y. and Bedford, Mass. Mellon later merged the two companies. Mellon, heir to one of America's biggest fortunes,

UTILITIES

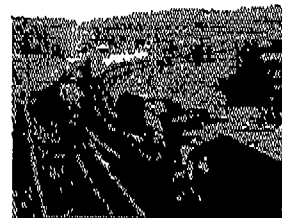
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PHOTOS



Deerfield Selectman
Carolyn Shores Ness
(PHOTO BY MARK
ROESSLER)



Pan Am Railways
(EESHA WILLIAMS PHOTO)

has been a major donor to President Bush and Republican members of Congress, and was a founder of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative advocacy group.

Pan Am is a big part of the reason Amtrak takes so long to get from Brattleboro to Springfield, and why there is no longer passenger rail service in Northampton. Until 1987, Amtrak took the direct route down the Valley, on Pan Am's tracks alongside the Connecticut River through Greenfield and Northampton.

Because Pan Am did such a poor job maintaining its tracks, trains were required to go so slowly that it became faster for Amtrak to switch to a more circuitous route over tracks owned by New England Central Railroad. This new route, which is still used today, sent trains traveling from Brattleboro to Springfield on a detour through Amherst and Palmer. Today, Pan Am's track in the Valley is in such bad repair that its trains typically average five to 10 miles per hour. When Pan Am workers want to stretch their legs they will sometimes get off the train they're on and walk alongside it as it travels up and down the Valley. So you don't have to be an economist to see why most companies that need to move freight up and down the Valley put it on trucks that go 70 miles an hour on I-91, rather than on Pan Am's tortoise-like trains.

Even at the glacial speeds they travel, Pan Am's trains sometimes derail. A Pan Am freight train derailed in Deerfield in September. Several of the heavy cars ended up lying on their sides, perpendicular to the tracks. (Witnesses to another recent derailment on New England Central tracks near Brattleboro compared the sound to an earthquake.) Deerfield police, fire, and ambulance personnel rushed to the scene, fearing that federally-designated hazardous material on the train had spilled. It turned out that the cars carrying hazardous material did not derail.

In October the town sent Pan Am a bill for \$6,915 for the emergency services it provided. The *Advocate* obtained a copy of a Nov. 22 letter from Pan Am lawyer Clinton Wright to the town. In three pages of highly legalistic prose written in tiny type, Wright refused to pay the bill, writing, "It is Pan Am's position that it is not liable to the Town or Fire Districts for costs associated with emergency response actions as there was no release of hazardous materials warranting such response

action."

Carolyn Shores Ness is a member of the Deerfield selectboard. She has worked aggressively to get Pan Am to pay what it owes the town for the derailment. She also wants Pan Am to pay a whopping \$228,078 it owes Deerfield in back taxes. "The railroad has not been a good neighbor," she said. "When a major taxpayer doesn't pay its taxes, it impacts the ability of our small, volunteer-run government to deliver services like schools and police."

Deerfield police chief Michael Wozniakewicz recently expressed concern about Pan Am's plans to remove the security guards it had provided at the Deerfield rail yard. Wozniakewicz said local police will have more calls to answer without the two officers Pan Am had previously stationed at the yards. Last year the company cut 60 percent of its police force system-wide, though in the post-9/11 world both passenger trains and freight trains carrying hazardous cargo are considered potential terrorist targets.

In 2004, a Pan Am train carrying sulfuric acid derailed in Greenfield, according to the *Greenfield Recorder*. The year before that, another Pan Am train carrying propane and chlorine derailed in Charlemont. No spills were reported either time. But in 1999, a Pan Am train derailed and spilled 6,000 gallons of latex into the Deerfield River.

"It turned the whole river white," Charlemont selectboard member Chuck Bellows told the *Advocate* recently. "It wasn't paint. We weren't sure what it was. They said it wasn't hazardous. At the time, we talked about sending them [Pan Am] a bill for around \$2,500 for our people's time, but I don't think we ever got around to doing it."

Warren Flatau is a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). He said Pan Am's safety record is "pretty average" compared to other mid-size railroads. Flatau refused to say how much Pan Am has paid in fines for violating safety rules. After the *Advocate* filed a request under the federal Freedom of Information Act, the FRA disclosed that in the 10 years ending December 22, 2006, the FRA fined Pan Am \$482,500 for 71 violations. The company paid just 57 percent of that amount, because FRA lowered the fines to avoid having to take Pan Am to court. When the *Advocate* asked the FRA for the average total fines for railroads the

same size as Pan Am for the same time period, the FRA claimed it has no way to provide that information.

Andrea Donlon of the Greenfield-based Connecticut River Watershed Council has worked for years with Deerfield Planning Commission member Lynn Rose to try to get Pan Am to clean up the mess at its Deerfield yard. "The company's technique for dealing with the groundwater pollution under the Deerfield rail yard is basically to not do anything and hope it goes away," Donlon said. "We don't know how serious the pollution is because the state and federal regulators haven't done enough oversight of the yard." Donlon noted that Pan Am's rail yard is located at the juncture of the Deerfield and Connecticut rivers--a spot that a recent study concluded was the most important section of the entire Connecticut River for the shortnose sturgeon, an endangered species of fish.

Pan Am has about 1,000 employees, according to George Casey of the United Transportation Union, which represents about 175 Pan Am conductors and engineers. (Workers who do track maintenance and other jobs belong to different unions.) Casey said Pan Am treats its workers the way the Army treats soldiers. "They're pretty discipline-oriented," he said. "Our guys are expected to be available for work 24/7. They don't get as much time off as they'd like. The average workweek is probably 48 hours."

There is some good news when it comes to rail service in the Valley. The state of Connecticut recently announced it will extend frequent, low-fare commuter rail service from New Haven to Hartford, at a cost of some \$300 million. It would cost Massachusetts about \$30 million at first, then around \$1.25 million per year, to extend and operate commuter rail service from Hartford to Springfield, said Tim Brennan, director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. "The odds of commuter rail getting to Springfield are better than 50-50," he said. "It depends on the legislature and the governor. In the best case scenario, commuter rail to Springfield could open for business by 2011."

If that happens, Brennan added, it's likely that commuter rail would eventually be extended from Springfield to Northampton, Greenfield, and Brattleboro. Brennan praised Congressman John Olver for his efforts to improve rail service in the Valley and urged people to call governor-elect

Deval Patrick and their state legislators to urge them to support the Hartford-Springfield commuter rail project.

Commuter rail ridership in eastern Massachusetts roughly doubled between 1991 and 2004. That's according to "Shifting Gears," a 2006 report by the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MassPIRG) and other environmental groups.

Meanwhile, the state of Vermont is "very keen" to get high-speed rail service restored along Pan Am's more direct tracks from Brattleboro to Northampton and Springfield, Brennan said. Yet to be determined is whether Vermont will be willing to pay the cost of buying the rights to have Amtrak use Pan Am's tracks in the Valley, and the cost of maintaining the tracks so trains could go more than 10 miles an hour. (After much resistance, Pan Am recently agreed to such a deal with Maine, allowing Amtrak service to resume between Boston and Portland.)

The Vermont legislature is expected to vote by the end of January on whether to spend \$18 million on three high-tech, fuel efficient "self-propelled" train cars and two passenger train cars. Amtrak would contribute \$2 million to the project. Vermont subsidizes the daily roundtrip Amtrak service that runs from Washington, D.C. to Burlington via New York City, New Haven, and the Valley.

Moving people and freight by train instead of by car and truck cuts global warming and acid rain, reduces suburban sprawl, and saves lives. Some 43,000 people are killed in auto accidents every year in the U.S. And, says Amtrak rider Carrie Dawes, trains are more fun. "Taking the train is more relaxing than driving," Dawes said as she stood in the sun with a dozen or so other people on a recent Sunday afternoon waiting for a southbound train at the Brattleboro train station. "You get a nice view."

Between 1992 and 2004, passenger rail ridership in the Boston-New York-Washington corridor grew by 40 percent. That means fewer people are dying in car accidents. In 2005, the most recent year for which data were available, 43,443 people were killed in auto accidents in the U.S. On a "passenger-mile" basis, trains were 38 times safer than automobiles, according to the National Safety Council. (Local buses were 15 times safer than autos; long-distance buses and scheduled airlines

were both 150 times safer than private automobiles.)

Trains are also cleaner. Some 70,000 Americans are killed annually by air pollution, more than one-third of which comes from transportation (almost all the rest comes from heating buildings and generating electricity). Shipping a ton of freight by rail uses less than half the fuel a truck would use, according to the MassPIRG report. The environmental benefits of moving people by train are similar. One "passenger-mile" takes 1,600 BTUs of energy on a commuter train; 2,100 on Amtrak; 3,600 by car; 3,800 by domestic airplane; and 4,000 by SUV.

MassPIRG notes that local, state, and federal governments spend far more on subsidies for driving—cheap gas, road construction and maintenance, cheap or free parking—than they do on trains, buses, bicycle paths and sidewalks. Because the gas tax is so much higher in Europe, and because money from the tax is used to lower the cost of train travel, it is often cheaper and faster to travel by train than by car, even in rural Europe. So far, public support for raising the gas tax in the U.S. to improve Amtrak and commuter rail has been unable to overcome lobbying by the auto, oil and road construction industries. The way things are now, if a state wants to build a highway, it gets 50 to 90 percent of the money from the federal government, says Ross Capon, director of the National Association of Rail Passengers. "If a state wants to spend money on making Amtrak better, they get zero from the federal government," he said. "People should call their representatives in Congress and tell them that has got to change."

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